

# YOU DIDN'T GIVE AT THE OFFICE

*An interview with Richard Rorty*

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*Why is freedom good?*  
 I don't think you can answer that. It's like asking why happiness is good, or why truth is good, or why virtue is good. Freedom has become the central value of modern societies, because people have gotten the feeling that if you can have freedom, every other good thing will sooner or later follow. Increase in freedom of expression, political freedom, will produce all the benefits that past societies have thought could only be achieved by the imposition of some kind of authority. "Increasing freedom" has by now become an all-purpose term of praise. We used to employ "serving Gods will" as such a term, and it would have been stupid to ask "why do you want to serve Gods will?" Now, it would be equally pointless to ask "why do you want to promote greater freedom?" In my own writings, I use terms like "freedom" and "solidarity" as quick ways of referring to a whole bundle of utopian ideals. There is nothing sacred about these concepts, but not much point either in trying to look behind them for a rationale.

*One of your slogans is: "If it doesn't talk, we are not answerable to it". Could you expand on that?*

It's a way of summarising a view about truth and justification. Some philosophers hold that it's one thing to justify your views and claims to other people, and another thing

to ask whether they're *true*. I'm claiming that if you're responsible to the people who ask you to justify your assertions, you don't have any further responsibilities to "the truth" or "reality" or anything else. All you can possibly do is to deal with other peoples objections, if you've done that, you've done everything.

*Given this view of justification, can pragmatism survive indefinitely as a minority position?*

I don't know. But a great deal of pragmatism has, so to speak, infiltrated the culture. Political science has disjoined itself from moral philosophy, and become a study of political institutions. The philosophy of science has transformed itself into history and sociology of science. These kinds of changes keep happening, and we pragmatists think of this as a good thing – as pragmatism gradually winning out. My hunch is that pragmatism will never be fashionable among philosophy professors – it never has been – but that its ideas may be picked up by intellectuals, professors in other subjects. If that happens, it really doesn't matter what philosophy professors do with it.

*In fact, you have suggested that we should move "everything" from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics. What do you mean by this and what can we hope to achieve by this move?*

I think of my suggestion as analogous to enlightenment

thinkers saying “let’s not look for a theological basis for our political arrangements; let’s not ask which form of government is most pleasing to God; let’s skip the theology and go straight to the politics”. I’m saying to philosophers: “go straight to interventions in current culture, without worrying about having an epistemological or metaphysical basis for your interventions.” As the enlightenment asked “what will make people happy?”, without asking what God thought of human happiness, so we should ask “what will make culture more free?”, without going on to ask “what in reality, or in the nature of knowledge, makes freedom so important?”

*Over four decades, you have argued this point from several lines, but in your lecture on Friday, I thought I heard something new, an “argument from nobody cares”?*

Well, it’s not exactly the premise of an argument. I guess the reason I brought in the fact that nobody cares much about philosophy these days is that philosophers – in the US anyway – point to the Anti-Darwinians of the so-called “creationist” movement, and say: “look, we philosophers are defending truth and rationality against these terrible people”. My response is “no, you’re just defending the enlightenment’s claim that religion should be kept apart from science and politics; nobody cares about what you say about truth and rationality”. It is not the case that by constructing some physicalist philosophical theory, you are providing useful ammunition in a culture war. Nobody who is not antecedently convinced of the truth of Darwin’s theory will accept your sophisticated version of physicalism. In the interest of efficiency, oppose the religious right more directly, and don’t think that by doing what you’re doing in the philosophy classroom, you’re serving a useful social purpose. There was an article some years ago about the Foucaultian left in American universities, written by a historian at Berkeley, David Hollinger, called “I gave at the office”. Let me explain the title:

Someone approaches you for a charity, and says “give some money to help the poor”, and you say “I gave at the office; there was a solicitation for money in my building; I’ve already given to this; so I don’t have to give any more”. Hollinger draws an analogy, saying that you used to be able to get professors to march on picket lines in support of labor unions and to go to Washington to voice protest. But now leftist professors say “I gave at the office; I wrote an article deconstructing a text, or giving a Foucaultian analysis of something; I’ve already done my social duty”. I want to use the same analogy and say to philosophers: “by constructing a physicalistic theory of reference, no, you haven’t struck a blow for the right political cause; you cannot claim to have given at the office”.

*So philosophers fail to get an audience. Are there people who should be listening to what philosophers have to say, but are failing to do so, or is the fault entirely on the side of the philosophers?*

I think it is, yes. But every once in a while, a philosopher says something interesting; Rawls did and Isaiah Berlin did. Then people actually listen. The educated public still thinks that philosophers must know something, even when they can’t understand what they’re doing. When a philosophy professor actually says something useful, they take it seriously.

*Your nemesis, the epistemologist, who sees herself as judging and grounding the knowledge claims of the rest of culture, does she really exist? Can you give us some names? Didn’t analytical philosophy itself take care of the positivists?*

I think if you gave me a day at the library, I could come up with some horrible examples, but not off the top of my head. Every once in a while, the American Philosophical Association gets out a statement of why we’re so important,<sup>1</sup> and it contains exactly the kind of rhetoric that I’m complaining about. And you can find the same thing in introductions to philosophy textbooks: claims that by studying the nature of knowledge and rationality, we can somehow make ourselves more rational and more likely to get knowledge. I don’t think analytical philosophy did change the traditional rhetoric much.

*What would you say to a young person who finds the questions “What is the place of consciousness in a world of molecules?”, “What is the place of value in a world of fact?”, “What is the place of intentionality in a world of causation?”, “What is the relation between language and thought?” exciting, and fun to read and write papers about?*

Be aware that there are people who think these are pointless questions. Notice that there is an opposition here.

*In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, you prescribe the following therapy to the mind-body problem: “If we are to understand how we got the intuitions that make us think that there must be a real, indissoluble, philosophical problem somewhere in the neighborhood, we have to set aside our up-to-date jargon and think in the vocabulary of the philosophers whose books gave us these intuitions”. Is it really plausible that philosophy has had that kind of power over common sense?*

What counts as the common sense of a culture, a generation, an epoch, depends on the canonical texts of a tradition. Common sense in China is not the same as common sense in the West, because they didn’t read Plato, and we didn’t read Confucius. When you get above the level of the search for food, sex, and shelter, I don’t

think there is such a thing as “common sense”. Above that level, it’s all cultural tradition. And figuring out where your cultural tradition comes from is the first step to figuring out whether it needs to be changed.

*To use myself as an example, I worried about the mind-body problem before I had read a page of philosophy. Is that Descartes’ fault?*

Yeah. I bet you if you’d been raised in China you wouldn’t.

*If Descartes and other past philosophers have had that kind of power, does that tend to undermine your argument that present philosophy – pragmatism aside – is futile?*

I don’t want to argue that philosophy is futile. Some intellectuals have made a real difference, and some of them are ones who, for various historically contingent reasons we call “philosophers”. Mill made a difference. He wasn’t a philosophy professor; he made his living in the India Office. Was he really a philosopher? Who cares? He was an influential intellectual. If nobody had written “on Liberty” and “Utilitarianism”, we wouldn’t think about politics the way we do. So intellectuals are not futile, they’re tremendously influential. It’s just that when a specific academic discipline tries to claim indispensability, you ought to be suspicious. What made Mill, Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche influential wasn’t that they were in the same line of business. Nietzsche was not put in the philosophy section of the library until after the Second World War; he was just a literary figure until Heidegger arranged for him to be included in the philosophical canon.

*In this volume we are also interviewing your fellow pragmatist Robert Brandom. Is he more radical than he lets on?*

He’s more polite than I am, but I think we’re both equally radical. I don’t think there’s any big difference between our views, but his manner is very different. He always tries to think the best of the opposition, and I usually think the worst of them. It’s a difference in temperament.

*You don’t think there’s any sense in which your approach is therapeutic, whereas Brandom’s is constructive?*

I think our self-images are different. He thinks of himself as contributing to the same discipline as Frege, Russell, Kripke, Lewis, Kaplan and so on. I think of him as shoving all that stuff aside, and doing something different. My image of him is different from his image of himself, but I’m not sure it matters. Some people read Hegel as a historicist who shoved Kant aside; others read him as the culmination of German idealism, a movement that began with Kant. “What was Hegel’s own self-image?” Who cares?

*Is Brandom’s charity the reason why you have such different views of Kant?*

Yeah, I think so. I specialise in blaming everything on Kant, whereas he keeps insisting that Kant is “the great, grey, mother of us all”.

*You and Robert Brandom have compared John McDowell to a mountain goat, hopping around the edges of the abyss of metaphysical realism. You don’t accuse him of ever slipping in, but you want to issue a warning for the kids not to try this at home. But this abyss – if it is one – isn’t the only one, is it? I’m thinking in particular about the pitfall of banal “whatever Frank believes is true-for-Frank, and whatever Kate believes is true-for-Kate” relativism. Is it possible that you relate to this chasm as McDowell relates to the other one; that a warning is in order; “this guy is a trained professional, he has read Kant and Williamson, but do not try this at home”?*

That’s a very good analogy; I think that’s fair enough.

*So you accept the label “mountain goat”?*

I write article after article about either why I am not a relativist, or why, in the sense that I am a relativist, it’s okay. It has no impact at all, people still see me as flirting with this danger. So I guess I had better just accept the label.

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<sup>1</sup> “Philosophy is quite unlike any other field. It is unique both in its methods and in the nature and breadth of its subject matter. Philosophy pursues questions in every dimension of human life, and its techniques apply to problems in any field of study or endeavor. No brief definition expresses the richness and variety of philosophy. It may be described in many ways. It is a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for understanding, a study

of principles of conduct. It seeks to establish standards of evidence, to provide rational methods of resolving conflicts, and to create techniques for evaluating ideas and arguments.” Quote from: *Philosophy: A Brief Guide for Undergraduates*. Prepared by the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on the Status and Future of the Profession; Approved by the APA Board of Officers